

Still in Search of Progressivism:  
If the Progressives Weren't Progressive What Were They?

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Abstract: The ideas of Progressive-Era political economy are too often extruded through the moulds of Progressive-Era historiography, which tends to project contemporary progressive values backward upon the original progressives. But the original progressives were not that progressive: they proposed eugenic remedies for the immigrants, women, blacks and mental defectives they blamed for low wages, promoted an illiberal vision of women's economics interests, endorsed survival of the fittest doctrine (so long as the state chose the fittest), advocated imperial adventures, and embraced the scientifically managed corporation. A more complete portrait of the progressives recognizes this illiberal strain in progressive economic reform and its origins in anti-individualism, statism, social efficiency, and the visible hand of planning.

## 1. Introduction

American Progressive-Era economists – the German-trained political economists who founded the AEA, occupied the first professorial chairs in the new research universities, blueprinted the reform legislation of an incipient welfare state, and trained cadres of students to serve in the new technocracy – founded American economics as an expert, academic discipline. The progressive economists played a leading role in the transformation of the state’s relationship to the economy, and their conception of social science, scientific expertise and right governance remains influential a century later. Seminal as they were, however, the ideas of Progressive-Era political economy are too often extruded through the moulds of Progressive-Era historiography, stripped of their particulars, and fit to a canonical narrative of the history of American reform, a narrative that represents the commitments and sensibilities of the original progressives as essentially identical to those of later reformers, from the New Deal to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This essay explores a kind of Whiggishness in Progressive Era historiography, what early chroniclers of the Progressive Era themselves knew as “creating a usable past,” and argues that American reform (or, if you like, American liberalism) is much too protean to allow the stability that the canonical narrative presupposes (Gerstle 1994).

## 2. The canonical narrative

In using the term “canonical” I do not wish to claim too much. The set of persons and organizations deemed progressive is quite heterogeneous, and famously fractious, enough so that some historians have despaired of identifying a coherent set of beliefs that can gathered under the rubric of “progressivism” (Filene 1970). But Progressive-Era historiography, for all the diversity it rightly recognizes, does evince important narrative commonalities – a common plot, common protagonists, and, yes, commonly held ideas about economic reform.

Indeed, the very familiarity of canonical narrative’s plot tells of its historiographic currency. It goes like this:

*The product of industrialization and its concomitants, urbanization, social dislocation and immigration, Gilded-Age problems of poverty, monopoly and plutocracy metastasize into crises so intolerable that they, by their own urgency, force themselves upon the public agenda (Rodgers 1998: 2). High-minded reformers rouse a slumbering state to intervene on behalf of labor, consumers, small business, and democracy itself. Guided by disinterested scientific*

*experts, especially economists who explain the causes of low wages, monopoly, and the (mal)distribution of wealth, a newly vigorous state passes legislation to protect vulnerable classes from the predations of industrial capitalism. Powerful obstacles block the establishment of a welfare state – the moneyed interests who stood to lose, a reactionary Supreme Court determined to thwart progressive legislation, and “old-school” economists unwilling or unable to see that the new industrial capitalism had rendered their laissez-faire doctrines obsolete. But right prevailed over might, the obstacles were overcome, and, depending upon the account, victory is declared upon the Social Security Act of 1935 or upon the Federal Labor Standards Act of 1938.*

The protagonists, of course, are the reformers historians call progressives. This essay’s topic is the canonical narrative’s characterization of economic reform in the Progressive Era.<sup>1</sup> In particular, I consider six claims about economic reform that are so well represented in Progressive Era historiography that we can call them canonical. Nothing much hangs on the label “canonical,” save my claim that these characterizations of progressivism are widely held among historians, even among those who disagree on other fronts. The progressives, according to the canonical narrative, were partisans of uplift, democrats who believed in equality for all, who, in particular:

- 1) Advocated for labor;
- 2) Promoted women’s economic interests;
- 3) Opposed survival of the fittest doctrine (a.k.a. social Darwinism);
- 4) Emphasized environment (nurture) over heredity (nature) in explaining social and economic problems;
- 5) Opposed war and imperialism;
- 6) Were hostile to the new industrial corporation.

I will argue that each of these claims is importantly incomplete, and that the omissions reflect the canonical narrative’s tendency to project contemporary progressive values backward upon the original progressives.

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<sup>1</sup> I do not here attempt a survey still less an explanation of the canonical narrative, which has its beginnings in the work of Progressive-Era historians who were themselves progressives.

So the first part of this essay summarizes earlier research, arguing that the original progressives were not that progressive. Leading progressives blamed immigrants, women, blacks and mental defectives for low wages and unemployment; proposed eugenic solutions to the perceived threat of inferior groups; promoted an illiberal, retrograde vision of women's economics interests, endorsed survival of the fittest doctrine (so long as the state chose the fittest), advocated imperial adventures, founded opposition to war on its putatively dysgenic effects, embraced the modern corporation, and advocated technocracy over democracy.

The second part of this essay, which employs as a template Dan Rodgers' (1982) still valuable historiographic essay, proposes a more complete characterization of the progressivism of the economic reformers.

### **3. Did the progressives advocate for labor?<sup>2</sup>**

The project of 21<sup>st</sup>-century progressivism is to uplift the poor and dispossessed via the humane agency of an activist state. So too with the original progressives, who essentially invented the idea. It is also true that labor reform was the hallmark of the Progressive Era, and that the labor question, perhaps more than any other issue, unified the various and fractious reform organizations. If progressivism stood for anything, it stood for labor. But it is not true that the progressives were advocates for *all* labor.

The original progressives, in fact, defended a radically restricted vision of who among the poor and dispossessed deserved uplift, a vision that eugenically sorted the poor into worthy and unworthy categories, and a vision that, moreover, depicted the unworthy poor as the cause, rather than the consequence of low wages and other economic ills. Making invidious distinctions among the industrial poor, the progressive case for exclusionary labor and immigration legislation was routinely founded on their belief that the labor force should be rid of unfit, undeserving workers, groups whom they labeled "unemployable," "parasites," "low-wage races," and the "industrial residuum."<sup>3</sup>

A Who's Who of progressive American labor reform argued that the biological infirmities of immigrants, blacks, women and mental and moral defectives caused low wages,

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<sup>2</sup> This section derives from Leonard 2003, 2005c.

<sup>3</sup> The AEA offered a large prize for the best essay on the evils of unrestricted immigration. The idea of using a literacy test to exclude undesirable immigrants is due to Edward Bemis.

justifying their removal from the labor force.<sup>4</sup> The following, which includes nine AEA presidents, is only a partial roster of the progressive luminaries who endorsed the eugenic virtues of exclusionary labor and immigration legislation: Emily Greene Balch, Edward Bemis, John R. Commons, Herbert Croly, Henry Farnam, Frank Fetter, Irving Fisher, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Charles Henderson, Arthur Holcombe, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Florence Kelley, Paul Kellogg (editor of the *Survey*), Richmond Mayo-Smith, Royal Meeker, Scott Nearing, Simon N. Patten, Paul Popenoe, Theodore Roosevelt, Edward A. Ross, Margaret Sanger, Henry R. Seager, Frank Taussig, Francis Amasa Walker, Lester Frank Ward, and Beatrice and Sidney Webb. Even Jane Addams made eugenic noises (1912: 130-33).

So, to illustrate concretely, when we say that progressive economists supported a legal minimum wage, this is true but incomplete. Progressive Era progressives also believed that binding minimum wages would disemploy many workers, and, further, that this disemployment was a social good, as it performed the eugenic service of ridding the labor force of inferior, undeserving groups.<sup>5</sup> The incomplete claim is compatible with contemporary progressivism, but the more complete version is decidedly not.

It is also the case that organized labor often spurned the labor reformers' advocacy, viewing it as no help at all. The progressives had a contentious relationship with Samuel Gompers (of the American Federation of Labor) in particular. Gompers fell out with the American Association of Labor Legislation (AALL), the leading organization of academic labor reform, when he came to believe that the progressive's approach to labor legislation was inimical to AFL interests. Once supportive of the progressive's race-suicide arguments for immigration restriction, Gompers came to believe that organized labor could do better by collective

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<sup>4</sup> The Webbs' taxonomy of the unfit included: "Children, the aged, and the child-bearing women . . . the sick and the crippled, the idiots and lunatics, the epileptic, the blind and the deaf and dumb, the criminals and the incorrigibly idle, and all those who are actually 'morally deficient'. . . and [those] incapable of steady or continuous application, or who are so deficient in strength, speed or skill that they are incapable of producing their maintenance at any occupation whatsoever" (Webb and Webb 1920 [1897], p. 785).

<sup>5</sup> Some eugenicists without training in economics, such as Karl Pearson, opposed the minimum wage. But, because Pearson incorrectly regarded minimum wages as subsidies rather than wage floors, he believed that minimum wages *benefited* the low-wage workers he regarded as inferior, and thus judged minimum wages to be dysgenic rather than eugenic in their effects.

bargaining, than it could by placing its interests in the hands of the progressive experts who proposed that the state administer solutions to the labor question in the name of the collective good.

Florence Kelley privately referred to Gompers as “that aged folly of a dodo,” and Gompers, for his part, took to calling the AALL the “Association for the Assassination of Labor.” That a leading organized labor figure attacked the progressives who claimed to be advocating for labor obviously complicates the canonical narrative. In particular, Gompers’ break with the AALL reveals a tension between the democratic approach (collective bargaining) Gompers preferred, and the progressive’s method, expert-led state administration, a tension that points up the progressive penchant (discussed in part II) for expertise and statism.

#### **4. Did the progressives promote women’s economic interests?<sup>6</sup>**

Did the progressive promote women’s economic interests? Yes, if one regards women’s interests as best served by removal from the labor force. Labor reformers were, of course, advocates of legislation that capped hours, fixed minimum wages, and regulated working conditions for women. But, their current reputation for feminism notwithstanding, the original progressives were, in fact, deeply ambivalent about women’s participation in the labor force, and often hostile to it. As with other groups they deemed unemployable, leading progressives commonly portrayed women’s labor force participation as destructive, and the progressive rationale for women’s labor legislation routinely argued for the virtues of excluding women from market work, in order to return them to the home.

The reform arguments for American Progressive Era labor legislation were various. Women-only labor legislation was seen to protect the biologically weaker sex from the hazards of market work (if not from those of domestic labor) and also to protect wage-earning women (if not women working in the home) from the temptation of prostitution. Thus did progressive arguments for sex-specific labor legislation appeal to paternalism and moralism. Paternalism toward women is not a feature of modern feminism, to be sure, but even more antithetical are the other leading Progressive Era arguments for women-only labor legislation: to protect male heads of household from the economic competition of women (i.e., to protect the “family wage”); and

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<sup>6</sup> This section derives from Leonard 2005b.

to ensure that women properly carry out their eugenic duties as “mothers of the race.” “Maternalist” and eugenicist arguments for excluding women from paid work were a commonplace among labor reformers.<sup>7</sup>

It is a peculiar sort of protection for women that argues for protecting men (from the economic competition of women) and for protecting the race – indeed it argues not for women’s rights but for women’s obligations -- but this is precisely how many eminent labor reformers argued. Indeed, when progressives calculated living wages, they assumed men deserved a wage sufficient to support several dependents, while women deserved only enough to support a single woman living alone.

And, it also important that what united each of these heterogeneous rationales for women-only labor legislation – paternalism, moralism, maternalism and eugenics – was the effect of discouraging women’s labor-force participation.

When progressives spoke of the “equal pay for equal work” idea, they often were not referring to the idea that women should receive the same pay as men in like occupations, but, rather, that motherhood – which was seen to require removal from the labor force – should be recognized as socially vital work, and be compensated by the state (Popenoe and Johnson 1918: 380-1). Paying women to stay home to bear and raise children was a popular progressive idea, in the United States and abroad. From 1911 to 1919, all but nine U.S. states passed “mothers’ pensions” laws (Rodgers 1998: 240).

Some historians argue that the progressives deliberately misrepresented their true beliefs out of tactical necessity: they falsely exaggerated the differences between the sexes in order to placate a conservative Supreme Court famously unwilling to allow regulation of male labor

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<sup>7</sup> Even scholars prepared to dispense with traditional family arrangements made a virtue of motherhood, as suggested by the example of economist Charlotte Perkins Gilman and her *sui generis* feminist eugenics. In *Women and Economics*, Gilman aimed to “urge upon [thinking women] a new sense, not only of their social responsibility as individuals, but of their measureless racial importance as makers of men” (1898: vii). Gilman’s feminist eugenics, what she called “Humaniculture,” envisioned women as the enlightened society’s eugenic agents. As radical as was Gilman’s conception, her account frames women primarily as mothers, albeit professional ones, for it is mothers on whom should fall the “racial duty of right selection” (1898: 201). The progressive, “maternalist” case for motherhood was thus, in its essentials, a case against the employment of women (unless women were to be employed as mothers).

contracts.<sup>8</sup> But progressive advocacy of women's difference continued even when the Court (in *Atkins* [1923]), following women's suffrage, would no longer entertain treating women as a protected class. Thus did the AALL and NCL progressives (under John R. Commons) oppose the first equal rights amendment, rejecting the full-legal-equality vision of the equal-rights feminists in favor their own vision: special-class protection of women based upon immutable sex differences. Wrote Florence Kelley: "[T]he cry Equality, Equality, where Nature has created Inequality is as stupid and as deadly as the cry Peace Peace where there is no Peace" (Kelley 1921, quoted in Lipshultz 2002: 200). When constitutional tactics could no longer rationalize their advocacy of sex differences, the progressive American economists and their labor legislation allies chose protection over equality for women.

### **5. Did the progressives oppose survival of the fittest doctrine (a.k.a social Darwinism)?<sup>9</sup>**

The progressives certainly were opposed to unregulated industrial capitalism, which some read as "nature red in tooth and claw." But it is untrue that progressives were opposed to survival of the fittest doctrine, still less that were they opposed to the use of biological ideas in political economy.

First, no eugenicist is opposed to selection of the fittest doctrine (nor to biological ideas). Eugenics is the program of state selection of the fittest. So all the leading progressives who endorsed eugenic policies *necessarily* defended survival of the fittest. Progressives cannot be distinguished from (most of) their critics on the question of survival of the fittest. The debate concerned, rather, *who* should select the fittest – the state or "nature" (that is, parents). The progressives did not oppose survival of the fittest; what they opposed was the idea that human reproduction should be left unregulated. Human evolution could also be planned.

So how is it that biological (especially Darwinian) thought is ordinarily identified with the *critics* of reform? Richard Hofstadter's *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944) is the source of the canonical narrative's account of the influence of biological thought upon the new sciences of society. Hofstadter (1944) treats "social Darwinism" not as a neutral description of

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<sup>8</sup> The progressives argued that women's difference provided a legal basis, on police power grounds, for States to treat women as a special protected class, thereby making legislative restraint of freely made wage contracts constitutional.

<sup>9</sup> This section, and the next two derive from Leonard 2005a.



Darwinian ideas applied to society, but as a kind of synecdoche for everything Hofstadter, in retrospect, saw progressivism to oppose: especially individualism and *laissez-faire* economics, but also imperialism, militarism, and racism. Hofstadter's codification, which associated social Darwinism with *laissez faire*, remains canonical. Important revisions notwithstanding (Bannister 1979), social Darwinism remains today an omnibus term of abuse, a label for benighted opposition to reform.

But Hofstadter's construction of social Darwinism is anachronistic. The term existed but had very little currency before Hofstadter's book was published.<sup>10</sup> Reformer Lester Frank Ward, a hostile critic of *laissez faire* and Darwinism alike, wrote in 1907:

I have never seen any distinctively Darwinian principle appealed to in discussions of 'social Darwinism.' It is therefore wholly inappropriate to characterize as social Darwinism the *laissez faire* doctrine of political economists . . . That *laissez faire* doctrine is false and not sustained by biological principles I freely admit and have abundantly shown, but the fallacy involved is to be found in an entirely different department of scientific investigation.

But Hofstadter's identification of social Darwinism with *laissez-faire* stuck, as did another Hofstadterian construct: the conflation of social Darwinism and eugenics.

Eugenics and social Darwinism, rightly understood, are as different as they are alike. They employed, for example, different concepts of fitness. The Darwinian defines as fittest those who survive to pass on their genes. The eugenicist, in contrast, believes that fitness is a measurable moral or racial or intellectual attribute that can be judged *ex ante*. The social control of human breeding, after all, cannot proceed without some prior judgment of which groups are biologically superior. Thus were progressive eugenicists hostile to the Darwinian notion of fitness. "The fittest, we all know" said Lester Frank Ward, "are not always the ideally best" (1907: 298).<sup>11</sup> Indeed eugenics is predicated upon the failure, or at least the inefficiency of

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<sup>10</sup> A case-insensitive search of the entire JSTOR database from 1800 to 1943 for "social Darwinism" or "social Darwinian" or "social Darwinist" yields a bare 53 hits. The same search from 1944, when Hofstadter's book was published to the present (June 10, 2006) yields 3,604 articles and reviews.

<sup>11</sup> In his influential *The Promise of American Life*, Herbert Croly of the *New Republic* put his case for a vigorous national government in eugenic language, arguing that artificial selection, by which he meant state-guided reform, was superior to natural selection (read: *laissez-faire*). The state, said Croly (1909, 191), had a responsibility to "interfere on behalf of the really fittest."

natural selection. So the progressives did not oppose survival of the fittest doctrine. What distinguished the progressives was their belief in, as Richard T. Ely put it, “the superiority of man’s selection to nature’s selection,” – that state selection was more efficient than natural selection in the essential task of weeding out the unfit (1901: 65).

## **6. Did the progressives emphasize environment over heredity in explaining social and economic problems?**

The canonical narrative ordinarily asserts that the progressives emphasized environmental rather than inherited causes of social and economic problems, such as poverty, crime, alcoholism, prostitution. That the progressives emphasized nurture over nature is, again, true but importantly incomplete.

Setting aside progressives like Karl Pearson, who said that nature wins over nurture in a canter, many progressives did indeed emphasize nurture in explaining human behavior. But it is crucial to remember that Progressive Era biology could and did accommodate nature and nurture together. No eugenicist doubted that social and economic pathologies were the product of bad heredity, progressive eugenicists included. But progressive reformers, well into the 1930s, argued, in the Lamarckian tradition, that heredity could be influenced by environmental factors.

Progressive eugenicists believed, for example, that characteristics parents acquired during a lifetime could be transmitted to progeny. The drinking of an alcoholic father could, for example, poison his “germ plasm,” so that his offspring inherited the affliction. Lamarckian views of inheritance made a reform eugenics possible – the improvement of bad homes could also improve bad blood. Indeed, “euthenics,” a term coined by the founder of Home Economics, Ellen Swallow Richards, described eugenic improvement through environmental means. “Euthenics,” said Richards, “deals with race improvement through environment” (1910: viii).

Many of the early American eugenics tracts were notably Lamarckian in orientation. Richard Dugdale’s (1877) famous *The “Jukes”: A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease, and Heredity* considered the family history of a “degenerate” white, Anglo-Saxon clan, whose genetic misfortune was, Dugdale maintained, partly the product of its degraded environment. Even with the increasingly Mendelian aspect of American eugenics after the turn of the century, Lamarckian views of inheritance were commonplace. Irving Fisher, for example, in his report

on *National Vitality*, said: “there is strong reason to believe that inheritance depends largely upon the physical condition of both parents at the time of conception” (1909: 101). A century ago, nurture could affect nature.

Modern Darwinism no longer permits it, but Progressive Era biology contained several theories of evolution, and readily accommodated Lamarckian inheritance, which progressives like Fisher and Richards used not to promote environment instead of heredity, but environment in the service of heredity.<sup>12</sup> So, progressives were indeed partisans of environment, but this emphasis did not preclude, and sometimes promoted, an emphasis on heredity.

### **7. Did the progressives oppose war and imperialism?**

It is true but that many progressives did oppose war and imperialism. Others did not. Some leading progressives, such as Theodore Roosevelt, were proponents not opponents of military adventurism. Karl Pearson, socialist and eugenicist, promoted Britain’s imperial wars in the name of preserving the Anglo-Saxon race.

More complicated is the fact that the grounds for progressive opposition were often eugenic. Many progressives condemned World War I not for its senseless destruction of human life, but for its destruction of the better class of person. Irving Fisher opposed the First World War on grounds it was dysgenic: “War’s real tragedy lies not in wrecked cathedrals, filled graves, or gutted treasure boxes,” Fisher opined, but in “its waste of the germ plasm” (quoted in Haller 1984, 88). Oliver Wendell Holmes agreed with his correspondent, Francis Pollock, that the problem with war “is not that it kills men, but that it kills the wrong ones” (cited in Dudziak 1985: 843). That war was wrong because it selected for the unfit was a common trope among reformers attracted to eugenics.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Darwin himself sometimes averted to Lamarckian views, especially in *The Descent of Man*. “Habits . . . followed during many generations,” wrote Darwin, “probably tend to be inherited” (cited in Degler 1991, 352 n. 29).

<sup>13</sup> Even those progressives who opposed WWI on largely pacifist grounds could entertain eugenic views. Emily Greene Balch, a Quaker, won the 1946 Nobel Peace for her public opposition to American involvement in WWI, a stance that cost her a Wellesley College chair in Political Economy. Balch also opposed, on eugenic grounds, subsidizing school books and lunches for poor school children, saying “If you simply want to have more people . . . depraved people quite as well as any other class,” then “feeding school children [is] a good thing; but if you believe it is important . . . to have more of the right kind of people, then any measure of

What is more, the canonical narrative wrongly indicts as imperialists the opponents of progressive reform, notably Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner, the canonical social Darwinists. This again shows the influence of Hofstadter's (1944) construct, which defines social Darwinism as opposition to reform, and then characterizes social Darwinists as defenders of not just individualism and laissez faire, but also militarism, racism and imperialism. But both Sumner and Spencer vigorously opposed imperialism, as might reasonably be expected of two leading exponents of limited government. In *Social Statics*, Spencer scorned English attempts to "justify our colonial aggressions by saying that the Creator intends the Anglo-Saxon race to people the world" (p. 142). He condemned the "piratical spirit" of imperialism, and insisted that "territorial aggression is as impolitic as it is unjust" (p. 322). Sumner, for his part, openly criticized the Spanish-American War, saying that "my patriotism is of the kind which is outraged by the notion that the United States was never a great nation until [this] . . . petty three months campaign" (Sumner 1919).<sup>14</sup>

#### **8. Were the progressives hostile to the new industrial corporation?**

As with the labor force participation of women and putatively inferior races, the progressives were ambivalent about the new industrial corporation. It is true that progressives sometimes joined populists in condemning bigness (of itself), and that they worried about the outsize political influence of the new captains of industry. Progressives like Theodore Roosevelt also busted trusts, even if the extent of anti-trust enforcement after 1890 was more limited than reputation implies.

But, for some leading progressives, a new kind of firm, the scientifically managed firm advocated by Frederick Winslow Taylor, offered both a method for overcoming destructive competition – planning -- and a model for more efficient government administration. Though "Taylorism" is today a term of abuse, especially on the Left, Taylor's model of scientific

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encouragement should be most carefully selective in character" (1907, 102).

<sup>14</sup> Sumner also opposed the tariff, a hot-button apostasy that, as with his opposition to the Spanish American War, nearly cost him his academic position. Sumner was an advocate for laissez-faire, not for industry, and when industry benefited from policies opposed to laissez-faire, such as the tariff, Sumner was their enemy. The point, often lost in the stark dichotomies of Progressive Era historiography, is that not all departures from laissez-faire will serve the cause of progressive reform; indeed, they can work to entrench the status quo that reform seeks to change.

management appealed to many progressives. Taylor's biographer, Daniel Nelson, judges Taylor's *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911) "above all a reform tract, a progressive manifesto" (cited in Kanigel 1997: 504).

Taylor's great champion, in fact, was Louis Brandeis, counsel to the AALL until tapped for the US Supreme Court by another AALL member, Woodrow Wilson. Brandeis called Taylor a genius and greatly promoted Taylor's theory when he used it to criticize the railroads in the *Eastern Rate* case of 1910. "The coming *science of management* in this century" Brandeis declared, "marks an advance comparable only to that made by the coming of the *machine* in the last" (emphasis original, cited in Kanigel 1997: 504).

Walter Lippmann believed that scientific management would "humanize work" (Haber 1964: 94). John R. Commons called scientific management "the most productive invention in the history of modern industry" (Haber 1964: 148). Muckraker Ida Tarbell called Taylor a creative genius, and gushed that "no man in the history has made a larger contribution to . . . genuine cooperation and juster human relations" (Kanigel 504-05). Florence Kelley, labor reformer, joined the Taylor Society, which, during the 1920s, served as refuge for future New Dealers, like Rexford Tugwell. Taylor's condescension to unscientific management, and the distinction Taylor's system made between the technological aspects of production and the financial ("pecuniary") side of business eventually won over Thorstein Veblen, an early skeptic. Even Lenin was drawn to Taylor's emphasis on increasing production above all else (Haber 1964, ch 8).

The appeal of Taylor's model to progressives is evident. Taylor promised greater efficiency, a leading progressive commitment, achieved by a more scientific approach to management, bringing system and intellectual order to the amateur, pre-scientific enterprise of business management. Scientific expertise conferred two kinds legitimacy for progressives. It offered not only (1) epistemic authority, crucial for the nascent sciences of society, but also (2) impartiality. Properly scientific rules were also fair rules, since, on the progressives' reading, science would not accommodate bias or interest.

So when Taylor proposed to substitute central planning for what he saw as the arbitrary power of bosses (shop foremen), progressives saw this as increasing not only efficiency, but also fairness. Finally, the output-increasing advantages of scientific management held out the

alluring prospect of obviating, or at least mitigating labor-management conflict. The promise of greater production made it possible for “both sides [to] take their eyes off the division of the surplus until this surplus becomes so large that it is unnecessary to quarrel over how it shall be divided” (Haber 1964: 27).

## II.

So, what do these six rather large lacunae in the canonical narrative add up to? Given their departures from the values of contemporary progressivism, what can we say about the original progressives’ thought? One response, of course, is the despairing one: that the many exceptions identified simply provide further evidence of the intractable heterogeneity of American progressivism, thus the impossibility of characterizing its thought with respect to economic reform. But I believe that there are some intellectual commonalities to be identified even in this more complex narrative.

Daniel Rodgers’ (1982) thoughtful historiographic essay, “In Search of Progressivism,” is still a helpful place to start. Rodgers argues that the many and various progressive groups drew upon, in different measures, three “clusters of ideas” in progressivism: (1) anti-monopolism, (2) social bonds (read: anti-individualism), and (3) social efficiency. My focus will be upon the last two.<sup>15</sup>

The foregoing reveals, I think, a deeply illiberal strain in American progressivism, which manifests in the tension between the progressive desire to uplift oppressed groups, and the progressive desire to socially control groups seen to be a threat to the social and economic order (Furner 1975: 308). Social control of inferior groups, like all eugenic thought, opposed the moral equality of human beings – indeed, it is predicted upon human hierarchy.

A belief in human hierarchy was by no means new in the Progressive Era. Racism and nativism were deeply rooted in the soil of American political culture. But these indigenous prejudices were biologized by progressive social science. Without abandoning the American

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<sup>15</sup> “Anti-monopolism” is probably better named anti-bigness, for it was the neoclassical economists, like John Bates Clark, who insisted upon the distinction between scale (which might confer lower costs) and monopoly, the power to affect price. Some progressives shared the populist hostility toward bigness, concentration of power, and elitism, a hostility with roots that go back to Andrew Jackson. But more progressives saw bigness, concentration of power and elitism (in the state) as appropriate weapons to countervail the influence of the trusts.

ethos of human improvement, or its distinctly moralizing language, the American progressives recast spiritual or moral inadequacy as biological inadequacy. Virtue and vice were remade from matters of character into matters of heredity.

### **9. Anti-individualism**

This transition from improving character to improving stock reflects an even more profound change in American thought – the Progressive Era attack upon individualism. Character is an attribute of individuals, but “stock” is an attribute of groups (e.g., races). Since inferior groups would not voluntarily reduce their fertility nor would they voluntarily leave the labor force, state compulsion was required to remedy race suicide. Anti-individualism allowed garden-variety racism, xenophobia and other forms of indigenous American prejudice to be transmuted into eugenic policy.

Rodgers refers to the Progressive Era’s emphasis on social bonds and the social nature of human beings. But this is too tame a label, for while true, the outstanding feature of Progressive Era thought was the progressive’s unprecedented assault upon individualism, which enabled American social science’s turn to methodological holism.

American progressives departed from the deeply rooted Lockean sensibility of their classical liberal forebears (and of the American founders). Classical liberalism stood on two pillars: one, individualism and two, property rights.<sup>16</sup> Though some progressives professed recognizably socialist notions upon their return from Germany, American progressivism ultimately left standing the pillar of property rights. Indeed, beyond some limited municipalization (“gas and water socialism”), few progressives were prepared to endorse state ownership of property, the heart of programmatic continental socialism. Herbert Croly put it this way: “There are two indispensable economic conditions of qualitative individual self-expression. One is the preservation of the institution of private property in some form, and the other is the radical transformation of its existing nature and influence” (cited in Fried 1998: 6).

The failure to attack property is what has led several Left historians, such as Gabriel

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<sup>16</sup> Classical liberalism makes the individual sovereign and puts special emphasis on the importance of property rights. Rights to “life, liberty and property,” are, in John Locke’s conception, natural rights (hence “inalienable”) – law does not create these rights, it recognizes and protects them. And, the liberty classical liberalism makes paramount is negative – liberty means freedom from coercion by other individuals and governments.

Kolko and James Weinstein, to condemn American progressives as “conservative.” By “conservative,” the Left historians mean insufficiently radical.<sup>17</sup> In fact, in Progressive Era parlance “socialism” sometimes referred less to state ownership of capital, than to a view of the proper relationship between the individual and society, broadly defined. As Robert Lee Hale put it, in a letter rebutting Thomas N. Carver’s charge of socialism: “the only sense of the word in which I am conscious of being a ‘socialist’ is in the sense of not being an individualist” (cited in Fried 1998: 233, n. 34).

But the American progressives did attack the other pillar of classical liberalism – individualism -- and with far reaching consequences. The Anglo-American individualism that the progressives were weaned on was overcome by the Bismarkian statism they admired as graduate students, the Social Gospel’s move from individual salvation to a collective project of bringing heaven to earth, and also by an indigenous illiberal tradition of human hierarchy, which posited a hierarchy not of individuals, but of groups.

The attack on individualism, which took on a bedrock American principle, was more than an appeal to cooperation, unselfishness, and public-spiritedness. As Rodgers points out, “that human beings live in a web of human relationships has never been open to doubt” (1982: 124). Though the progressives seized “upon a rhetoric of social cohesion,” they imagined not cooperation among individuals but compulsion of individuals in the name of the social whole. Richard T. Ely, firing the early shots of his AEA insurgency, said that progressive economics “places society above the individual, because the whole is more than any of its parts” (Ely 1886, 54).

When the whole is greater than its parts, then someone has to look out for the whole’s interests. The progressives, with their faith in their own disinterestedness as a reliable guide to the social good, sometimes nominated themselves – a form of rule that Lester Frank Ward called “sociocracy.” In other places, progressives were less frankly elitist, preferring to elide the difference between society and the state. Ely, for example, called the state the “great cooperative society,” identifying the state with society rather than imagining the state as the agent of

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<sup>17</sup> I agree with the charge that the progressives were conservative, but for different reasons. The rejection of state ownership of capital does not make one a conservative; “conservative” does not exhaust the category of non-socialist. But the progressives *were* conservative in their impulse to impose order upon what they saw as the disorder of the new industrial capitalism.



society.<sup>18</sup> Ely disputed the classical liberal view that the state is formed by individuals in a state of nature, deriving its legitimacy solely from the consent of its individual creators. “Men are born into the State . . . the basis of the State is human nature, and the State is the natural condition of men” (1884: ). But, in both events, the progressives repudiated individualism and embraced the idea that society can have interests apart from (and prior to) the individuals who constitute it – a view antithetical to the liberal tradition.

Progressive hostility to individualism was embodied in the Progressive Era’s catchphrase, “social control,” popularized by Edward A. Ross (1901). Social control, for Ross, did not refer narrowly to state regulation of markets, but described the ways in which society “can mold the individual to the necessity of the group” (Furner 1975: 309). Men were but “plastic lumps of human dough,” Ross maintained, to be formed on the great “social kneading board” (in Rodgers 1982: 123).

Not all progressives idealized the state as much as did Ely, Ward, Ross, Simon Patten, Herbert Croly and Theodore Roosevelt, for example, men for whom “the lines of social connection always ran toward the nation, the state . . . .” Some progressives, like Jane Addams spoke more of “the bonds of family, community and neighborhood” (Rodgers 1982: 125). But most progressives involved in economic reform, even those like Florence Kelley, who originally preferred moral suasion to legislation, came around to statism, the idea that the state should promote a collective interest with or without the consent of its individual citizens.

## **10. Statism and expertise**

Rodgers rightly flags what was a profound tension for American progressives. The progressives’ impulse to statism – using government to set the world to rights – was tempered by their recognition that American government, at all levels, was itself badly in need of reform. Corrupt and decentralized, the state was, at once, the “locus of progressives hopes, and also the source of their unease” (1982: 125).

The tension between the government progressives imagined and the government they

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<sup>18</sup> Ely, a Social Gospeler, went so far as to invest the state with divine favor: “God works through the State in carrying out his purposes more universally than through any other institution” (Fine 1956: 180).

observed did not induce them to abandon statism. Instead, the progressives proposed a kind of technocracy, where experts would administer progressive programs, free (or at least insulated) from the messy business of democratic politics. Progressivism proposed to separate politics from scientific administration, and its more extreme examples proposed to subordinate politics to administration (Haber 1964: 104). Veblen, who imagined an economy governed by a Soviet of central-planning technicians, is only an extreme example of the undemocratic, technocratic impulse in American progressivism.

The lack of a European-style professional civil service made American progressive statism more difficult. Just as the efficiency experts in the scientific firm's planning department brought order to the unplanned chaos of the shop floor, so too would government expertise bring order to the unplanned chaos of industrial capitalism. But before the state could order the chaos of the competitive marketplace, it would be necessary to bring order to the state itself – that is, to replace the political bosses and their machines with socially minded expert administrators. As one widely read eugenics text put it: “government and social control are in the hands of expert politicians who have power, instead of expert technologists who have wisdom. There should be technologists in control of every field of human need and desire” (Albert Wiggam's *New Decalogue* 1923 cited in Ludmerer 1972: 16-17).

The progressives believed in the explanatory power of social scientific inquiry, and they also cultivated the epistemic authority lent by the imprimatur of “science.” What is more, progressives also saw science as conferring impartiality. Scientific truths might be hard truths, but there was no gainsaying them – scientifically derived laws, unlike politically derived laws, were not the product of bias and partisanship, and thus were deemed fair. The authority of academic experts derived from the authority of science, as signaled by their professorial chairs. When Edward A. Ross described progressivism as “intelligent social engineering” (cited in McMahon 1999: 90), he was invoking both the epistemic authority and the impartiality of applied science.

As statist, the progressives imagined that expertise would be deployed by the state. By its very nature, expertise was an elite product -- scientific, not democratic in origin. The idea was that the benignly motivated experts would interpose themselves, in the name of the social good. The case for technocratic governance was put baldly by Irving Fisher (1907: 20), when he said:

“The world consists of two classes —the educated and the ignorant — and it is essential for progress that the former should be allowed to dominate the latter. . . . Once we admit that it is proper for the instructed classes to give tuition to the uninstructed, we begin to see an almost boundless vista for possible human betterment.”<sup>19</sup>

## 11. Social efficiency and measurement

Technocracy – statism joined to expertise – was a means. The great end of technocracy, for many progressives, was to increase social efficiency, what Rodgers encapsulates as “efficiency, rationalization and social engineering” (p. 126). The scientific state would substitute rational planning and efficiency for the unplanned chaos and waste endemic to competitive markets, and thereby conserve on natural, social and, especially, human resources.

By efficiency, progressives meant productive efficiency, or economizing.<sup>20</sup> “Conservation” was often a cognate term of art. The AALL’s motto was “conserving human resources.” “The problem of conserving natural resources,” Irving Fisher (1909: 1) argued in his *National Vitality*, “is only one part of the of the larger problem of social efficiency,” particularly that of human efficiency. Madison Grant author of *The Passing of the Great Race*, is today remembered as a reactionary scientific racist, but he also was a leading conservationist, who regarded the despoliation of Western lands and the despoliation of the Anglo-Saxon race as like problems demanding a like solution -- the intervention of expert stewardship.

It is difficult to overestimate the progressive enthusiasm for social efficiency. Greater efficiency, for many progressives, essentially defined progress. Following Brandeis’s intervention on behalf of Taylor (who published *Scientific Management* in 1911), a flood of volumes on efficiency appeared, preaching greater efficiency not just in industry and in government, but also in education, in medicine, in the home, and, crucially, in human beings themselves. Joseph Mayer Rice’s 1913 bestseller, *Scientific Management in Education*, reported on the results of the new educational testing. Irving Fisher (1909: 15) advocated “biological

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<sup>19</sup> One puzzle to be explained is the progressives’ extraordinary faith – which runs from naive to hubristic -- in their own disinterestedness as a reliable guide to the social good.

<sup>20</sup> The progressives meant the term to mean productive efficiency, also known as economizing. When Taylor referred to the “engineer as economist,” he did not mean that engineers should become “political economists,” but that they should economize, promote greater productive efficiency.

engineering,” by which he meant the study of “the conditions under which the individual may reach his highest efficiency.” Ellen Swallow Richards (1911, 391), founder of home economics, advocated greater efficiency in the home, arguing that “the work of home-making in this engineering age must be worked out on engineering principles, and with the cooperation of both trained men and women.” The social workers at Hull House and elsewhere pioneered the use of social surveys, and of neighborhood maps to visually display their data.

Efficiency, of course, demanded measurement. Introducing *The Wisconsin Idea* (1912), a manifesto for the progressives’ technocratic vision of professorial experts guiding legislation, Theodore Roosevelt argued that without “measures of result an ideal becomes meaningless.” Progress, Roosevelt argued, depended on measurement: “The real idealist is a pragmatist and an economist. He demands measurable results. . . . only in this way is social progress possible” (cited in Brown 1991: 139).

Efficiency experts measured not only the productivity of factory floors, public schools, households, and immigrant tenements, they also measured mankind – measuring human bodies, human character, and human intelligence. The late Progressive Era marks the advent of measuring intelligence. Stanford psychologist Louis Terman’s 1916 manual for the Binet IQ test *The Measurement of Intelligence* was soon followed by *Human Efficiency and Levels of Intelligence* (1920), written by Henry Herbert Goddard, superintendent of the Vineland (NJ) School for Feeble-Minded Boys. Before eugenicists dreamed of measuring intelligence, they measured human heads. At the turn of the century, Veblen’s *Journal of Political Economy* published an extraordinary outpouring of articles by economist Carlos Closson, who popularized and proselytized for the scientific racism of two leading physical anthropologists, Georges Vacher De LaPouge, and Otto Ammon (e.g., LaPouge and Closson 1897).<sup>21</sup>

The Progressive Era connection between the state, the new sciences of society, and measurement was an intimate, interlocking one. “The welfare state,” historian of statistics Ted Porter reminds us, “evolved in conjunction in with new kinds of data and new forms of social

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<sup>21</sup> The anthropologists measured thousands of human heads, calculating the cephalic index, or ratio of head width to head length, which they believed demonstrated a permanent race hierarchy. Anthropology, they informed the *JPE*’s readers, was “destined to revolutionize the political and social sciences as radically as bacteriology has revolutionized the sciences of medicine” (1897: 54).

science” (2003a: 39). Progressive social scientists, notably the founders of the AEA and the AALL, pointedly distinguished the empirical method of their reform economics from the more abstract, deductive approach of late classical political economy (Barber 1987). “Look and see” preached Richard T. Ely. “Whenever you can,” Francis Galton pronounced, “count” (Kevles 1995: 7). Progressives were, of course, well known for their private surveys of industrial and social conditions.

But the rise of measurement – especially the measure of human bodies, character, and intelligence – was advanced most by the rise of the welfare state.<sup>22</sup> US and state governments not only funded statistical bureaus, they provided unprecedented access to human subjects – WWI draftees, Ellis Island immigrants, school children, and the institutionalized. The progressive emphasis on statistics is deeply connected to the progressive emphasis upon the state.<sup>23</sup>

## **12. The visible hand of planning**

I agree with Rodgers that Progressive Era social efficiency -- “the merger of the prestige of science with the prestige of the well-organized business firm” – “gave the “metaphor of system its tremendous twentieth-century potency . . . .” (126). But I disagree that there existed a incongruity in progressive thought revealed by progressives who “slide back and forth between criticism of business-made chaos and schemes to reorganize government along business lines.”

On the contrary, the progressives were consistent: they celebrated the scientifically managed firm, and used it as a model for the technocratic state they envisioned, but they rejected competitive markets as chaotic and inefficient. Systems, like scientific management of the firm,

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<sup>22</sup> Eugenic legislation, says eugenics historian Diane Paul (1995: 6), had to “[await] the rise of the welfare state,” and so, too, to a large extent, did eugenic research.

<sup>23</sup> Ted Porter (2003b) reminds us that this connection between the state and measurement is a vital one. At the beginning of the Progressive Era the word “statistics” still carried its older meaning of “state numbers,” or, more precisely, “state data,” that is, the collection, classification and discussion of facts (numerical and other), that pertain to questions of state (OED). Indeed a “statist,” in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, is the name for a practitioner of state data, or statistics. Only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century does statistics begin to refer to the use of mathematical techniques, derived from probability theory, for data analysis.

are planned orders; markets are unplanned (spontaneous) orders.<sup>24</sup>

For progressives, planning was the source of order. Social efficiency came not from bottom-up innovations produced by market competition, but from top-down plans produced by experts. The planning department determines how to realize greater efficiency, and subordinates execute the plan.<sup>25</sup>

In the era before Soviet-style central planning, Taylor's scientific firm was the exemplar of planning as the means to social efficiency. Some progressives, like Veblen, even imagined the economy as a single, giant firm. This vision simply extended outward the hierarchical, planned control of scientific management, turning islands of conscious power – little command economies – into a continent of conscious power.<sup>26</sup>

Market competition, for the progressives, was disorderly, chaotic and wasteful. The scientifically managed business firm – “the island of conscious power” – was, in contrast, orderly, rational, hierarchical and efficient, *by virtue of the fact that it suppressed competition*. Progressives saw the visible hand of planning as a substitute for Adam Smith's invisible hand of market forces (Chandler 1977).

In the end, the progressive hostility to competitive markets paved the way for American neoclassical economics. John Bates Clark's neoclassical economics co-opted the progressive's reform impulse, and their emphasis on social scientific expertise, but he rejected the progressive preference for planning over competition. In answering the overarching question of Progressive Era Political economy – what shall be the relationship of the state to the economy? – Clark

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<sup>24</sup> Dennis Robertson (1930: 85) described firms as “islands of conscious power in this ocean of unconscious cooperation, like lumps of butter coagulating in a pail of buttermilk. The head of a single big business to-day exercises a width and intensity of rule which a Tudor monarch might have sighed for in vain.”

<sup>25</sup> Of course, his claims to fairness notwithstanding, Frederick Taylor, like all planners, was not eliminating authority. He was merely relocating it, this by flattening the organizational hierarchy, and placing real authority, especially the authority to hire and fire, with the planning department. Taylor did indeed reduce the power of the shop foreman, but he did so by relocating it to the expert planner (Haber 1964: 25).

<sup>26</sup> Leading industrialists, such as John D. Rockefeller, were pleased to adopt this rhetoric, invoking the language of efficiency in order to justify their anti-competitive practices.

argued that the state should promote not suppress competition.

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